

Documents on Diplomacy: Resources

Briefing Memo: Diplomacy During the Civil War and the Later 19th Century

Some of the most important victories of the Civil War weren't won on the battlefield, but at the negotiating table. The most important diplomatic concern of the United States was to ensure that the British remained neutral—and that battle was almost lost along with Fort Sumter in 1861. The possible recognition of the Confederacy by the British was a matter of concern even before shots were fired. Fortunately, one of America's legendary diplomats was on the way.

Charles Francis Adams—son and grandson of Presidents—had been schooled in Britain and knew British society well. He understood that powerful forces were forcing the two sides into extreme and inflexible positions and took immediate action to calm the waters. He was successful. Skill, insight, and patience kept the two from war and mended Anglo-American relations enough to keep the British neutral during the dark days of 1861-1862.

The Diplomacy of Abolition

Adams realized that the British misunderstood the conflict between the Union and the Confederacy and certainly did not realize that slavery—and not states rights—was at the heart of the war. Adams' believed that with time, the British public would care more about the abolition of slavery than their own economic suffering due to the loss of Southern cotton, so he worked to keep the issue at the diplomatic forefront. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, Adams wrote to his son, did "More Good than All Our Former Victories."

During his difficult tenure as Minister to Great Britain, Adams looked for inspiration and example to the man he called America's only "full-grown" leader—his father, John Quincy Adams. And, at the end of the day, Charles Francis Adams followed his moral convictions in charting a diplomatic course.

While British neutrality was the main concern of Secretary of State William Seward, it wasn't his only concern. Taking advantage of America's wartime preoccupation, the French intervened in Mexico's debt crisis in 1863 and installed Maximilian, an Austrian prince, as Emperor in 1864. The French decided to withdraw in 1866 when confronted with the reality that a 900,000-man American army was no longer fighting a Civil War. In 1867, the Mexicans executed Maximilian.

A Costly Humbug and Sham

In the years after the Civil War, Americans were preoccupied almost entirely with domestic affairs and expansion. In 1889 one senator commented, "We have separated ourselves so completely from the affairs of other people that it is difficult to realize how large a place they occupied when the government was founded." Experience in foreign affairs was no longer a prerequisite to national leadership. From 1877 to 1893, no secretary of state or president (with one exception) had any overseas experience at all. Diplomats were reviled. One newspaper wrote, "It [diplomacy] is a costly humbug and sham. . . . It spoils a few Americans every year, and does no good to anybody. Instead of making ambassadors, Congress should wipe out the whole service." It is not surprising that very little of enduring significance was accomplished—with one exception.

In 1867, Secretary of State Seward purchased Alaska from Russia for \$7.2 million. Most Americans, including those in Congress, knew nothing about Alaska and considered it a bad bargain. But after a hard fought political battle, Congress approved the expenditure of funds. While some realized the value of the land, most still called it Seward's Folly; or at least they did until gold was discovered in 1896.

The rapid growth of the western United States resulted in periodic labor shortages. One of the first industries to feel the pinch was the railroad industry. In 1865, the Central Pacific Railroad began to recruit Chinese workers for work on the transcontinental railroad. The Burlingame Treaty of 1868 guaranteed the Chinese the right to unrestricted, free entry into the country. By 1880, 75,000 Chinese workers were living in the United States and were the target of increasing violence from white laborers. The treaty was renegotiated to allow the United States to "regulate, limit, or suspend" Chinese immigration, but not to stop it entirely. Congress passed the Exclusion Act of 1882 to suspend all Chinese immigration for 20 years. While the Chinese Government protested, the issue was no longer one of diplomacy, but of domestic politics.

As the end of the 19th century neared, change was in the air. Cuban rebels were waging a long and bloody insurrection against Spain, while France struggled to build a transoceanic canal through Panama. European powers squared off over tiny Pacific islands, while the United States looked over the western horizon toward Hawaii. It was only a matter of time before the "affairs of other people" would again occupy center stage and America would need her diplomats again. ■